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THE WEIRD OF SIR LANCELOT.

BY MARY CHILD.

THE writer of the article entitled "Lancelot, Guinevere and Arthur," in a recent number of *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW*, waxes indignant with Tennyson for his portrayals of these famous dwellers in the land of chivalry. Her contention with the poet is on account of his eulogy of the marriage tie against the instincts of love. Since Tennyson's own marriage was such an ideal union, there is small wonder at his exaltation of the marriage bond. The true source of resentment against him will be found in the fact that he follows Malory in the perversion of one of the most pathetic of old-world stories.

The hint of spiritual warfare is confused by Malory with the idea of earthly lust. His version of the legend, albeit delightful reading, is of the earth, earthy. He misses the tender sadness in the life of Lancelot as well as in the life of "the perfect Queen," though her sorrow springs from a different source. And the beautiful poems found in the "Idylls" of Tennyson are forever spoilt to the lovers of the twain by reason of his desecration of their shrines.

Perhaps the oldest version extant is the "High History of the Holy Graal," translated by Sebastian Evans. That version gives us the story in a different setting. There is the beautiful picture of the ideal wife, who is sorrowing for her husband (Arthur) in case he is losing his prowess.

"Queen Guenevra was so sorrowful thereof that she knew not what counsel to take with herself, nor how she might so deal as to amend matters so God amended them not."

On one Ascension day, the King finds her in tears because she has "great fear lest God hath put him into forgetfulness." He is moved to seek adventure for the glory of God. And as he

rides away with "the bearing of a knight of great pith and hardiment," she asks the lords, "How seemeth you of the king? Seemeth he not a goodly man?"

Such a naïve appeal proves her love. She will have every man praise him. According to one damsel it is partly the Queen's fault that the King has fallen into idleness: "But never again will he move from Cardoill, do what he may, such dread hath the Queen lest any should take him from her."

When Arthur returns to Cardoill, "the Queen and knights make great feast of him and great joy." He shows her his wound "that had been right great and painful." "The King goeth into the chamber and the Queen with him, and doeth the King be apparelled in a robe of cloth of silk all furred of ermine, with coat, surcoat and mantle."

When he tells her of his adventures, she is glad. "'Sir,' saith she, 'right joyous ought you to be that your Saviour hath had you in remembrance. . . . God be praised thereof.'"

"By God's pleasure, the wish and will had come back to him to win honor and to do largesse as most he might."

When the King is obliged to set forth on the Quest, "the Queen herself would he have taken thither but for the mourning she made for her son, whereof none might give her any comfort." Their beloved son, Lohot, had been treacherously murdered by Kay the Seneschal.

In the King's absence, his domains are invaded by Briant of the Isles and Kay the Seneschal. And the Queen dies of grief, fearing that he has been slain, since she can glean no tidings of his whereabouts. She is buried in the church at Avalon, where she has ordered a coffin to be prepared for her beloved husband by her side: "The body of the Queen lieth in the coffin before us, and in the other is the head of her son, until such time as the King shall be ended, to whom God grant long life! But the Queen bade at her death that his body should be set beside her own when he shall end. Hereof have we the letters and her seal in this chapel, and this place made she be builded new on this wise or ever she died."

Shame on the man who cast the first stone at this "best earthly Queen"! There is neither whisper nor hint of desire concerning Lancelot. There is no talk like that of the garrulous little maid of Tennyson concerning a sinful Queen and her guilty mate.

Nay, the hermits and clerks keep sacred watch over the body of their "best earthly Queen": "The best Queen in the world and of most understanding is dead, nor never hereafter shall be none of equal worth."

The hermits commend the unknown knight (Lancelot) for his vigil in the chapel. "Never yet did no knight cry mercy of God so sweetly, nor of His sweet Mother, as did this knight that is in the chapel."

When they beg him to take food and rest and he declines, as he will keep vigil in the chapel, they agree that "the worshipful man is of good life who will keep watch in such manner throughout the night without drink or meat, for all that he seemeth to be right weary." And what of Arthur, the husband, whose "thought is on Queen Guenievre in what place soever he may be, for nought loveth he so well as her"? Instead of the terrible meeting between the sinning and repentant wife and the injured, austere husband of the "Idylls," the "High History" shows how he grieves over her enshrined memory until the end of the story. When he wins her crown in tournament,—the crown which he has given her; when he hears of her death, he is "full sorrowful and draweth on one side." "Of the mourning the King made is there nought to speak, for this sorrow resembleth none other."

He is obliged to continue the Quest, though, as the writer observes, "You may well understand that King Arthur is no whit joyful." After the Quest is fulfilled, he "cometh to the Isle of Avalon, there where the Queen lieth." "But you may well say that the King is no whit joyful when he seeth the coffin where the Queen lieth and that wherein the head of his son lieth. Thereof is his dole renewed, and he saith that this holy place of this holy chapel ought he of right to love better than all other places on earth."

When he reaches Cardoill and is sitting at meat, "he was bent upon thinking rather than on eating." "The King looked round about the table and remembered him of the Queen."

Queen Jandree, a Pagan, demands he should wed her or suffer invasion and conquest of his lands. "'Damsel,' saith the King, 'tell her, moreover, I send her word that never more shall there be Queen in my land save she be of like worth as was Queen Guenievre.'"

After her death, all vigor seems to have departed from him,

and his knights are sent to fight his battles in his stead. Briant of the Isles, who has been taken into favor, poisons his mind against Lancelot. But his only accusation is that Lancelot is aiming at the crown. Lancelot is recalled and imprisoned, but the King is still unhappy. "The King was one day in the hall at Cardoil, right heavy; and he was at one of the windows, and remembered him of the Queen. . . . Lucan the Butler seeth him right heavy and draweth nigh to him quietly. 'Sir,' saith he, 'meseemeth you are without joy.' 'Lucan,' saith the King, '*joy hath been somewhat far from me sithence that the Queen hath been dead.*'"

It seems almost sacrilegious to read Tennyson after such pathetic words as these!

And Lancelot of the Lake? What is the story of his life and the weird which he was to dree?

In the first introduction, he is offering his life to a knight, because a brother of the latter has died in his service: "I will go with you, that so I may reward you of that he hath done for me. He delivered his body to the death for me, and in like manner freely would I fain set mine own in jeopardy for love of you and of him."

He is regarded as one of the three most renowned knights of chivalry. Gawain and Percevale love him as their best-prized friend. A damsel surprises him with his love for Guenievre, and he *blushes* at her words: "You love the Queen Guenievre, the wife of your lord, King Arthur; not so long as this love lieth at your heart may you never behold the Graal." As he lay at the castle that night, he is angry because she has called it disloyal. Lancelot, living in the same atmosphere with the ideal woman, is irresistibly attracted to her. And the love is so great that no other woman may take her place. He has the love of the brave chivalrous man surging at his heart. To such men, love only comes but once. The intensity of the passion is like the strength of their nature. It can never be forgotten. It can never be recalled. Of the other knights, Gawain is her kinsman, and Percevale is above all earthly affection.

Then wherein lies his sin? Those who achieve the Graal must be absolutely pure in thought, word or deed. Though King Arthur is husband and father, he may achieve it because his union is an ideal one.

Whether the love of Lancelot would be regarded as sinful or not in these days, it is regarded as such by the damsel and hermits of the Graal. The history is written in the white light of the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount. Lancelot, himself, acquiesces in their conception. He confesseth to the hermit at the Graal Castle, "and saith that of all thereof doth he repent save only one, and the hermit asketh him what it is whereof he is unwilling to repent. 'Sir,' saith Lancelot, 'it seemeth to me the fairest sin and the sweetest that ever I committed.' The hermit rebukes him for calling any sin fair, and Lancelot explains:

" 'This sin will I reveal to you with my lips, but of my heart may I never repent me thereof. I love my Lady, which is the Queen, more than aught else that liveth, and albeit one of the best kings on live hath her to wife. The affection seemeth me so good and so high that I cannot let go thereof, for, so rooted is it in my heart that thence may it never more depart, and the best knight-hood that is in me cometh to me only of her affection.' " The hermit is scandalized, and urges him to put it away from him.

" 'Ha, sir,' (sighs) Lancelot, 'she hath in her such beauty and worth and wisdom and courtesy and nobleness that never ought she to be forgotten of any that hath loved her.' "

The hermit concludes he has been guilty of actual sin and blames the Queen. But Lancelot attempts to explain his position.

"God is so sweet and so full of right merciful mildness, as good men bear witness, that He will have pity upon us, for never no treason have I done toward her, nor she toward me."

"The Graal held not aloof for that Lancelot was not one of the three knights of the world of the most renown and mightiest valor, but for his great sin as touching the Queen, whom he loved without repenting him thereof, nor never might he remove his heart therefrom."

The good King Hermit declares, " 'And you had had the like desire to see the Graal that you have to see the Queen, the Graal would you have seen.' 'Sir,' saith Lancelot, 'the Queen do I desire to see for the sake of her good intent, her wisdom, courtesy and worth, and so ought every knight to do. For in herself hath she all honorable conditions that a lady may have.' "

And the good King Hermit understanding his position and peril, prays, "God grant you good issue therein, and that you do nought whereof He may visit you with His wrath at the Day

of Judgment." The hint of spiritual strife instead of actual mortal sin is very strongly marked in this passage.

The most important point in the story is this. Neither the King nor his fellow knights have any idea of the trouble at his heart. The unrequited love must be concealed at any cost. When Arthur and Gawain embrace him at parting, "Lancelot would willingly have sent salute to the Queen had he durst, but he would not that the King nor Messire Gawain should *mis-deem* of the love they might carry to their kinswoman."

When he goes to his expected execution, he "mindeth him of the Queen, and crieth God of Mercy and saith, 'Ha, Lady, never shall I see you more! but might I have seen you yet once again before I die, exceeding great comfort had it been to me, and my soul would have departed from me more at ease. But this, that never shall I see you more, as now it seemeth me, troubleth me more than the death whereby behoveth me to die, for die one must when one hath lived enough long. But faithfully do I promise you that my love shall fail you not yet, and never shall it be but my soul shall love you in the other world like as my body hath loved you in this, if thus the soul may love.'"

Possibly succeeding writers have built their misconceptions upon this passage. Yet it looks as if Lancelot clings to the idea that he may still be able to love her in the next world as he has done in this. But the love is all on his side.

When he hears of her death, he is obliged to dissemble his grief. "Lancelot knoweth not what he may do, and saith between his teeth that now hath his joy come to an end and his knighthood is of no avail, for that he hath lost the high Queen, the valiant, that heart and comfort gave him and encouragement to do well. The tears ran down from his comely eyes right amidst his face and through the ventail, and, had he durst make other dole, yet greater would it have been."

The expressions "high Queen" and "encouragement to do well" should surely lift her above earthly stain.

Like the King, he never recovers his joyfulness after her death. Unhappily his comeliness and courtesy attract women. Yet when the maidens woo him in their despair he never gives them a reason for his refusal.

In his journeyings, unwittingly he finds the Chapel of Avalon, and passes the night in vigils. "When Lancelot heareth that it

is the Queen that lieth in the coffin, he is so straitened in his heart and in his speech that never a word may he say. But no semblant of grief durst he make other than such as might not be perceived, and right great comfort to him was it that there was an image of Our Lady at the head of the coffin."

As the hermits have no idea of the state of his heart, they conclude he is keeping vigil before the image.

Though he is so anxious to conceal his love lest people discover it, in later years, unhappily, he has received the blame he dreaded. Instead of blame, pity should be granted to the comely knight of chivalry, who passes through the pages with the canker of hopeless love at his heart. He is so true and honorable that only a damsel of the Graal and the good King Hermit are aware of its existence.

The pictures of the two men nursing their grief are very pathetic. For one of them, it is the story in "Twelfth Night"—but with a difference. Though he is denied the Graal, he does not pine away in solitude. On the contrary, he is ever the champion of the distressed and the avenger of the wronged. For the sake of the King, he fights against fearful odds. He bears him no malice for wrongful imprisonment. "'Sir,' saith Lancelot, 'your amends love I much, and your love more than of any other; but never, please God, will I mis-do you for aught that you may have done to me, for it is well known that I have not been in prison for no treason I have done, nor for no folly, but only for that it was your will. Never will it be reproached me as of shame, and, sith that you have done me nought whereof I may have blame nor reproach, my devoir it is to withhold me from hating you; for you are my lord, and if that you do me ill, without flattery of myself the ill you do me is your own; but, please God, whatsoever you have done me, never shall my aid fail you, rather, everywhere will I set my body in adventure for your love, in like sort as I have done many a time.'"

The calm dignity of this speech is that of an injured friend. It would be an impossibility in the mouth of one who had violated the honor of the King and tarnished his own good name.

"'Lancelot,' saith the King, 'how is it with you?' 'Sir,' saith he, 'it hath been ill with me long time, but, please God, it shall be better hereafter.'"